BASIC ATTITUDES UNDERLYING THE WORKS OF SHIRLEY ANN GRAU

by

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INTRODUCTION

Shirley Ann Grau was born in New Orleans on July [illegible], 1929. She is one of two daughters of Adolph [illegible]. Grau and Katherine (Onions) Grau. Her ancestry is German, Scottish, and Louisiana Creole. She attended the Booth School in Montgomery, Alabama and Newcomb College in New Orleans where she joined no organizations, and participated in no athletics for they struck her as being very dull. In 1950 she received a B. A. degree with honors in English and went on for one year of graduate work at Tulane University where she did research in English literature of the Renaissance and seventeenth century. She married author and teacher James Kern Feibleman in 1955 and now has a son, Jan James. They have a winter home in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans, and a summer place on Martha's Vineyard.

Miss Grau says that she writes primarily for enjoyment. She has published three books, one a collection of short stories, and the other two novels. Thirteen short stories have been published in magazines: The New Yorker, Mademoiselle, The Atlantic Monthly, The Reporter, Vogue, Saturday Evening Post, Redbook. Six of these are included in her books. The rest of her stories have been reprinted in the O. Henry and Martha Foley collections, and several are included in the collections, New World Writing. She has also written several non-fiction articles about the Gulf Coast for Holiday. Her first book, The Black Prince and Other Stories, a collection of short stories published in 1955, caught

the critics' attention and praise with its concise, vibrant style: and she was heralded as one of the twentieth century's most promising young writers. Her landscape shimmers under the almost unbearable heat of the summer sun, or broods in the melancholy, continual rain of winter. The Negros and middle-class whites who people her stories float freely, caught up in the "random, spiraling movement of life." Those who attempt to struggle against the current are cautioned by their elders, " 'You only get your neck broke that way'." Their values spring from a primitive admiration for physical strength and attractiveness, and a businesslike concern for practicality, ready cash, and sound investment. Miss Grau received excellent reviews on this first book. Riley Hughes writes, " 'In all these stories, she has caught the authentic slur of speech, the slant of shadow on a blue night, and the random spiraling movement of life'."[1] Critics are surprised to find an absence of the "Southern gothic" which they have come to expect in Southern writers.

> " 'Look in vain for the decadent South of the popular phrase', says The San Francisco Chronicle, 'Miss Grau's writing is honest and creative, and deals with real people rather than caricatures, and with the real problems of people, rather than with the dreams of dreamers'."[2]

William Peden expands on the same observations.

> " 'She avoids sensationalism, violence, and whimsy for their own sakes. She writes out of neither sentimental love, nor tear-filled despair. Hers is not a namby-pamby world of dreams, or a darkened alley in

[1]Catholic World, 180:470, Mr. 1955.

[2]Feb. 6, 1955, p. 19.

> which animals die senseless deaths. Frustration and violence and death are present in her world, but so are serenity and achievement and life. She has produced a world not haunted by victims of malignant destiny, but an essentially vibrant one lived in by human beings whom she reveals during moments of stress, crisis, or decision'."[3]

John Gardner, in The New York Times, sums up the attitude of most critics toward The Black Prince and Other Stories.

> " 'Judging from this extraordinary collection of short stories, Shirley Ann Grau is quite likely to be one of the chief literary discoveries of recent years. ...Miss Grau has the irresistable authority, the instinctive feeling for form and language (obviously strengthened by a lot of hard work), and that pervasive relish for the wonderful particularities of human nature that are part of the equipment of a born writer'."[4]

After such a successful reception of her short stories, Miss Grau set about writing a novel. She discarded her first attempt, and her second one, The Hard Blue Sky, published in 1958, is actually another collection of short stories relating the experiences of various individuals who compose a small community on one of the islands off the Gulf Coast. A certain unity is achieved by the fact that the time span is limited to a few months and many of the experiences are interrelated. Each section is sufficiently complete within itself to stand alone, and three were published separately in story form in magazines before being compiled into a novel. The novel is concerned with

> "the witty, resourceful, sometimes inscrutable, always courageous descendents of Lousiana's French-

[3] Saturday Review, 38:16, Jan. 29, 1955.

[4] Jan. 16, 1955.

> Spanish pioneers living on the tiny Isle aux Chiens in the coastal curve just east of the tripartite mouth of the Mississippi. Depending upon the fickle Gulf for their livelihood, they have no illusions about the hazards of life and fortune. They watch, they quarrel, and they love--always beneath a hard blue sky. But they accept with bravery and zest whatever a day brings."[5]

The Gulf Coast seen through Miss Grau's eyes is a savage fairyland where men live perilously, exhilaratingly close to nature. Her enthusiasm for the coast sparkles in an article written for Holiday.

> " 'The Gulf Coast? Let me tell you about it. To the south is the Gulf: glistening beaches, safe waters with tiny whitecaps, and on the horizon the shadow line of sheltering islands. To the north are forests of long-leaf pine, orchards of the pink blooming tung tree: semi-tropic swamps of cypress and Spanish moss, flaming hibiscus and oleander; and silent moving deer. ...I like it. I like the way the whole country shimmers under the sun, the sky a dome of hard, almost unbearable blue, and the flowers flamboyant'."[6]

This gift for description of setting is obvious in The Hard Blue Sky and is a source of praise for her first novel along with her sensitive perception of people and her realistic but unquestionable lyricism. The negative criticism stems primarily from her lack of a definite plot, though some critics don't consider this a damaging weakness. Gene Baro of the New York Herald Tribune says " 'Miss Grau brings sea, sky, land, and men into the vital relationships of reality. ...If this novel seems at times fragmentary and discursive, it is yet a notable achievement, for its interest remains unfailing'."[7]

[5] Library Journal, 83:1932, June 15, 1958.

[6] "Mississippi's Magic Coast", 17:60, June, 1955.

[7] June 22, 1958, p. 3.

Charles Molo also has praise for her novel, but it is not unqualified.

> " 'Miss Gray recreates in all its dimensions the singular life of an inbred almost isolated little world. She is a fine artist but she has stretched her material too far. It could have been handled more effectively within the compass of a novelette'."[8]

Time has a similar criticism.

> " '<u>The Hard Blue Sky</u> is additional proof that Author Gray is a born short story writer. She could make the ordinary Negroes and Whites of <u>The Black Prince</u> seem special and even important. But in nearly 500 pages of <u>The Hard Blue Sky</u> its poor white fishermen wear out their fictional welcome. ...Life on Isle aux Chiens flows along endlessly, and she leaves it just where she found it. It is a pity that Author Gray did not wrap up the island in one of her fine short stories that have the knack of checking a perpetual flow and explaining its course'."[9]

A. H. Morris feels that the novel

> "never quite coalesces or achieves the necessary dramatic drive. It is weakened by its very diversity. But if, like an out-of-whack kaleidoscope, it is composed of myriad fragments that fail to shake together into a satisfying organic whole, the fragments themselves often have the genuine flesh and cutting edge of art."[10]

Elizabeth Bartelme disagrees with most of the critics in her consideration of the lack of plot as one of the strong points of the book. " 'Her novel has a kind of casual looseness that makes room for many stories, tales which, far from destroying the unity of the book, tighten the fabric of the world she constructs'."[11]

[8] <u>Atlantic</u>, 202:84, August, 1958.

[9] 71:52, June 23, 1958.

[10] New York <u>Times</u>, June 22, 1958, p. 5.

[11] <u>Commonweal</u>, 68:380, July 11, 1958.

Miss Grau's third book, The House on Coliseum Street, 1961, unlike her previous books, received far more negative criticism than positive.

> "This novel is set in New Orleans and describes the enfeebling effects of an abortion on a young girl's capacity for happiness. The girl, Joan Mitchell, lives with her mother, Aurelie, and her four younger half sisters--each of them the daughter of a different father. The story depicts Joan's slow withdrawal from bewilderment into silence and hatred...and the atmosphere of the beautiful old house in which selfish, practical, still handsome Aurelie and her daughters all live."[12]

Here again we have a series of experiences, following Joan Mitchell through the various stages of reaction toward her situation, rather than a tightly knit plot. The very quality which prompted the most favorable comments on Miss Grau's first collection of short stories is the basis for the strongest adverse criticism which she received on this novel: her ability to "catch the shape of a lifetime in the merest shadow of an event." Her treatment of a momentous experience in the life of one individual, when drawn out to novel length, loses the spontaneity and vividness which make her best short stories memorable.

There are a few favorable critics who are willing to overlook the lack of plot and other weaknesses which most of the reviewers bring to attention. Her lyrical style and craftsmanship remain her strong points. Time sees Shirley Ann Grau as

> "a master of the Soft Focus School of fiction. ...In the hands of a first rate story teller, the shortest line between fact and feeling is not a straight line...What concerns her here...is not plot but the endless flux of feeling. Writers of encyclopaedic novels would do well

[12] New Yorker, 37:95, June 24, 1961.

to read her--and learn how to catch the shape of a lifetime in the merest shadow of an event."[13]

Kirkus carries the most favorable review. "It is a sad, wistful, young, timeless story, graced by this writer's fine drawn perceptions of lives which are private but never ingrown and by the still, soft enchantment of her prose'."[14] Coleman Rosenberger, however, sees "only occasional flashes of...imaginative and verbal magic here, magic which lit up page upon page of Miss Grau's memorable first book."[15] *Booklist* says, " 'The novel's impact is weakened by occasional melodrama, but the author's customary craftsmanship and sense of place gives strength to the story'."[16] Warren Beck says, " 'The describing a seasonal and personal progression, the novel returns upon itself in a welter of inconclusiveness'."[17] F. M. Lyell in The New York *Times* has the most bitter criticism of all. " '*The House on Coliseum Street* is an insignificant, tawdry tale, wobbly in structure and oftentimes slip shod in style'."[18]

Many readers who find Miss Grau's stories intriguing are also troubled by their seeming lack of commitment to any definite moral or philosophic code. She answers this observation with

[13] 77:70, June 23, 1961.

[14] 29:364, April 15, 1961.

[15] New York *Herald Tribune Books*, July 23, 1961, p. [illegible].

[16] 57:634, June 17, 1961.

[17] Chicago *Sunday Tribune*, June 25, 1961, p. 4.

[18] June 18, 1961, p. 4.

the comment, " 'I wasn't trying to do anything in the moralistic sense of the word. I have no cause, no moral; I'm not proving that this is good and this is bad. I'm just telling a story about some people whom I find interesting'."[19] Actually it is not that her works are totally lacking a conviction toward life, but that one, as yet, does not seem to have completely crystalized in the writer's mind. Though Miss Grau is not the type of writer who enjoys pounding home one moral observation after another, certain basic attitudes toward life and human relationships begin to appear when her writings are taken as a whole. The air of assurance with which she writes, while at the same time hesitating to commit herself to any definite message or code, lends to her writing an air of elusiveness which leaves the reader with a vaguely troubled feeling that there is something of significance here that he has not quite grasped.

Though it is often difficult to draw conclusions about an author's attitudes through a study of his characters' reactions and thoughts, and many times downright misleading, there seem to be some consistent attitudes running through Miss Grau's work in spite of the fact that she insists that she has "no cause and no message."

[19]Library Journal, 83:484, February 1, 1955.

ATTITUDES OF CHARACTERS

Life

Life is seen as a series of experiences along the continuum of time which moves with the same unchangeable flow of rivers and seas. Caught in this current at birth, powerless to make any major alterations in the direction of its flow, unable to formulate any clear conception of the meaning or purpose of life from their vantage point along the swirling eddies of the surface, Miss Gray's characters learn to float with the tide which carries them from youth to old age. Joan Mitchell, heroine of House on Coliseum Street, finds herself

> "leaning on time like a cushion. Feeling it flow like water. It was an illusion she sometimes had in the morning. That she floated in a current, effortlessly, time, the everlasting river. Things happened as she slipped along. But not to her."[20]

Even becoming pregnant and undergoing an abortion does not take the form of a concrete experience, for the whole chain of events is beyond her control. "She remembered it in a kind of haze. She felt curiously left out. Everyone else moved with such purpose. They all knew what they were doing and they didn't bother to tell her."[21]

Desiring some meaningful experience to give her life purpose, she goes on with the familiar routine of school.

[20] Shirley Ann Gray, The House on Coliseum Street, (New York, 1961), p. 213.

[21] House, p. 135

> "She picked her courses at random, and kept choosing them until her schedule was filled. She wasn't interested. It was just something to do. While waiting... waiting for what? She didn't have an answer. Even for herself. Sometimes it seemed that she was waiting for the telephone to ring."[22]

Most of Miss Grau's characters seem to take this passive attitude toward life rather than getting out in pursuit of experience and answers to all the unanswered questions. As maturity approaches, the many unanswered questions of youth are set aside resignedly, the unknown accepted as unknown, and an attempt is made to function as well as possible within the small area of the familiar present. Annie Landry, the young girl on the verge of maturity about whom many of the episodes of The Hard Blue Sky revolve, ponders "all the thoughts, swirling around inside...like colors, all mixed. And how would you make sense out of them? Or did you just wait?"[23] Many things are beyond human control, but an individual choice is necessary now and then. Through these decisions an individual may exert some control over his life other than merely meeting the demands of necessity in remaining alive. Annie Landry, conscious of this, comes to the conclusion that

> "right now was what mattered. She couldn't remember the past very well. And she couldn't imagine the future. ...There wasn't anything back there. Only there didn't happen to be much here either...She wasn't happy. But she certainly wasn't sad either. She was waiting, waiting for things to happen to her. Things that could be handled and changed. And things that could just be handled. She felt herself grow great and passive in her waiting."[24]

[22] House, p. 173.

[23] Grau, The Hard Blue Sky, (New York, 1958), p. 333.

[24] Sky, p. 427.

Gaining little satisfaction from personal experiences which seldom measure up to their expectations, Miss Drew's characters find comfort in the realization that life is a continuous process above and beyond individual experience. This concept relieves them of much of the terrible responsibility for personal actions and reactions, for most of them are dictated by necessity, and even those which are not absolutely necessary still fit into the repetitive pattern of continuous life. Joan Mitchell thinks,

> " 'I wanted none of the things that have happened. They just came along. I didn't intend them. Time and things like a river, passing. Before me, and after me. Things will go on happening when I am dead. Pass around me and over me and go on. And instead of being frightened, she felt comforted'."[25]

Inky D'Alfonso, crew of the yacht which sails into the bay of Isle aux Chiens who eventually becomes Annie Landry's lover, marvels at the ability of the fragile-appearing Isle aux Chiens to hold its own in the continual battle with natural forces with much the same wonder that is felt upon observing the persistent struggle of the human body against the overpowering elements which threaten to extinguish the spark of life that it holds.

> " 'What about the island', he wondered. 'There wasn't any height or real-looking substance to it. The wind and the Gulf together could lift it right off and scatter it all up and down the coast in a million billion pieces. But it hadn't gone,--and nobody remembered to count the hurricanes that had passed while people were living here'."[26]

Even when one person dies, there are others to carry on the life process. When Henry Livudais, teen-age son of Eddie Livudais, one

[25] House, p. 231

[26] Sky, p. 296

of the island fishermen, disappears into the swamps it doesn't change anything. " 'Except maybe for his family, everything keeps going like he never was here. ...Can't go stopping, just one crazy kid. ...Get all upset, and then we forget it'."[27] Eureka Fortunenne, the sage old woman on the island who has outlived many hurricanes, meets each announcement of the new events with, " 'I have seen excitement before...the same thing, or another just alike'."[28] When asked to elaborate on this statement, her stock comment is, " 'You got to find out for yourself'."

There are many things which can be understood only through experience and " 'there a lot of things you don't figure out...in your whole life'."[29] One of the most difficult things to understand is human behavior when it moves out of the necessary routine of life, and meets death as a result. When Rose in "The Girl With the Flaxen Hair" is killed stealing coal in the train yard, they wonder, " 'Why'd she go?...You don't need coal in spring. ...All she did was get killed'."[30] The priest asks the same question when Berry is lost in the swamp. " 'Why do they always go?... Only a month ago, there were three of them in the swamps around Petit Prairie'."[31] Another source of bewilderment is death. It is summed up in the reaction of a girl watching a group of children

[27] Sky, p. 277.

[28] Sky, p. 363.

[29] Sky, p. 411.

[30] Crew, "The Girl With the Flaxen Hair", The Black Prince and Other Stories, (New York, 1955), p. 143.

[31] Sky, p. 265.

playing funeral and singing, "We will gather by the river, the beautiful river." She keeps asking, "Which river? Which river? There?"[32] Eddie Livedain voices the most common cry of all, "Why I got to fight for everything?"[33]

The answers to these questions are never satisfactory, for they counsel a resigned acceptance of the way things are rather than a thorough understanding. Henry's uncle says, " 'A boy got to go out and look around. ...He got lost, him. ...He got to die, for sure. ...We been living like that all our lives, and we ain't like to change now'."[34] And Maxere Terreborne with all her years of experience says, " 'I think maybe it is a good thing for man to fight. They got to fight...even an old one like me'."[35] Annie's stepmother, Adele Landry, comforting her small son in the face of a hurricane, might be counseling him about life.

> " 'Look', she said, as much to herself as to the boy, 'we ain't going to be alone. And even that ain't so sad ...nothing to it. Just a little wind and some little rain.' ...Claudie began to wail. ...She slapped him, harder than she would have used to do. For the first time, she saw fear, and then hate came into his eyes. 'I never tell you it was easy'."[36]

People find even their own actions incomprehensible, and the understandings they do gain come quite unexpectedly. Joan Mitchell learns to look upon herself as a separate person. "She found herself observing her activities, being a little surprised with each

[32] Green, "One Summer", Prince, p. 239.

[33] Sky, p. 265.

[34] Sky, p. 232.

[35] Sky, p. 442.

[36] Sky, p. 461.

discovery. She regarded herself with interest and detachment."[37] Annie Lamory begins to understand how romances start with the realization that Inky needs a woman.

> " 'So', she thought, ...'that was how it started. Still, maybe. And how did you find out. ...It wasn't something you could ask. And it wasn't something you could push. How did you know? And what did you do?... Maybe you just waited and waited and nothing happened. And maybe if you tried to hurry it, it would go all wrong and he'd go running away a thousand miles'."[38]

Each new realization carries with it more unanswered questions. She also comes to understand how decisions are made, but not necessarily how to make the right ones, when she decides to leave with Inky.

> " 'If I'm going at all, I'm going now. That was it. It came on you all of a sudden. And it wasn't the way you thought it was going to be. There wasn't anything wild about it or strange. It was just there, like lots of other things. And you took it. Or not. And only looking forward or back you saw how important it was, really'."[39]

When long-awaited experiences or realizations do arrive they are often disappointing. Joan thinks, after telling her mother about her pregnancy, "It should have been more dramatic, somebody should have yelled. It's so casual and easy."[40]

Since the whole process of life remains a mystery, and the only understandings gained arise from immediate experience, there is a tendency to cling to the present and the familiar. The constant

[37] House, p. 184.

[38] Sky, p. 179.

[39] Sky, p. 402.

[40] House, p. 133.

process of time with its accompanying changes bewilders people, for they cannot see any definite goal toward which the whole process moves. Annie says, " 'Not being able to see where you're going always makes me kind of nervous'."[41] Joan "tried to set herself securely on this tiny spot of time that she was occupying. Trying for balance, delicately like a dancer."[42] Belle Livingais, Jerry's mother, ponders this aspect of time more fully.

> "Time worked that way. Like the sand and grass over in the marsh. Whatever stood on it slipped down into it and disappeared. Not so fast you could see it going. Not still after a while, it was gone. She hated time, she thought. Forever cutting off things behind you, and then in a while cutting off what you remembered of those things and leaving you just a little narrow spot of present and near past to stand on."[43]

When Annie comes to Cecile Bordeaux, one of the young women on the island, with questions and complaints about the way things are, Cecile offers the solution recommended by most of Miss Gram's characters for unhappiness and dissatisfaction: get busy. " 'I used to worry with things like that', she says. 'Then I got married, me, and there wasn't time anymore. ...Seems like there's just time for all the business of living and nothing else'."[44]

And, indeed, this business of living takes up a considerable amount of time and demands patience, courage, and perseverance. A man gains respect simply by living a long life.

[41] Sky, p. 424.

[42] House, p. 220.

[43] Sky, p. 97.

[44] Sky, p. 116.

Great-Uncle Henry is venerated in Aurelie's family, his outstanding qualities being that he lived to be eighty, made a little money on sugar cane, survived a couple of depressions, outlived all his children, and saw his great-grandchildren get married. Facing life consists primarily of developing a resigned attitude. In facing problems, people seem to think of the solution they settle upon as the only way out. When offered a choice of actions, they tend to seek the easiest one. Since results are seen as unpredictable, they have no basis for judging which would be the "best" action.

> "Things happened, and you did whatever it was you had to do to meet them. And they went on past you. And what you were came out in the way you handled them. And what you were changed from one month to the next and maybe even from one hour to the next. And no use quarreling with the way things were. Or the way you were."[45]

The most common reaction to pain or trouble is, "There ain't nothing I can do." The deputies at Petit Prairie go home on the weekends when men from the Isle aux Chiens come over, for men are bound to fight and get drunk and the deputies can't be expected to object to things they don't see. Women must have babies, and they bear the pain unquestioningly.

Manner of Facing Problems

A decision made, an action executed, is followed with a sigh of relief, not for being well done so much as simply being done.

[45] Sky, p. 427.

The feeling that actions are performed under compulsion deprives them of intrinsic satisfaction and relieves the executor from any strong feeling of responsibility for them. Joan, leaving the dean's house where she has just told the story which will ruin the career of Michael Kern, the college professor who has fathered her illegitimate child, has a feeling of relief. "She was finished. She had done what she had to do. Now she could start to forget."[46] Once an action is under way, there is no longer the problem of beginning. For better or worse it is started and there is nothing to do but follow along. This cold-blooded resignation exists even after such violent actions as murder. William, a young Negro in "The Way of A Man," after killing his father, thinks, "He had not intended to, but he had done it, and now there was no use standing shivering like a baby. A man did what he did and didn't study about it afterwards."[47]

There is no room for hysterics or remorse in Miss Gran's world. People are expected to be sensible and practical, and carry out their responsibilities. Al Landry, Annie's father, advised to quit fishing since there is no money in it, replies patiently, " 'No there ain't. But I reckon you do what you're used to. And I'm accustomed, me, to that'."[48] A hurricane is met with an air of calm.

"People stayed inside, behind the closed shutters

[46] House, p. 23[illegible].

[47] Gran, "The Way of a Man", Prince, p. 208.

[48] Sky, p. 150.

> and the barred doors. Some lit candles and fingered their beads. Others began to drink, carefully, knowing that their supply might have to last a long time, and careful too that they didn't get drunk, but only felt warm and comfortable. Some people played cards and learned new tricks or practiced fancy dealing."[49]

Women or unhappy women may erupt in angry words or silently rock on the front porch, but they see that meals are always prepared. Men in similar circumstances tend to get drunk or into fights, sobering up the next day to continue their roles as providers.

Since Miss Grau's characters believe they have little control over events, courage and strength are necessary to meet the demands of a situation. If these qualities are weak, the best solution is to ignore the problem or run from it. This escape can take the form of physical action, rationalization, or withdrawing from the scene of unhappiness. Physical action is a common salve for loneliness, though other emotions also find release through this channel. Al Lamarr feels better after he cries for his dead wife for a while. Joan Mitchell, feeling vaguely lonely and upset, bakes an angel food cake and rides the street car around the belt three times. Bobby Livudais, left out of the game played by the other children, climbs a palm tree. Joan, in another fit of melancholy, plays "Liebstod" over and over again on her phonograph. Perique, caught up in young love's passion, busies himself sanding down the boat deck.

When the stability of their world is upset, men tend to get into fights. Unable to fight the forces which upset their stability, they fight each other. Sometimes the natural world is

[49] Sky, p. 466.

responsible for a change in stability. Spring is "a couple of weeks of hesitation and indecision between the rainy winter and the long, dry summer. There are always more fights and knifings then."[50] One day when the Gulf has the restless uncertain feeling of a storm on it somewhere some of the boys go into Vatt Prairie. "Nobody knew if they started it, but around nine o'clock everybody was fighting and yelling over at Rose's Cafe."[51] Sometimes men are responsible for a change in stability, but these men are usually too powerful to be fought, and those affected take out their resentment on each other.

> "For the three months when the two houses (of State legislature) or the state supreme court are in session in Stanhope, the price of liquor always rises until it is beyond the reach of the colored people. ...Those who haven't the money must sweat out the time sober. ... There are more fights this time of year than any other. More knifings."[52]

One man causes an upheaval in a small Negro community because he has more money than the rest of the people.

> "Things can go as smooth as glass if everybody's got about the same things and the same amount of money. ...But when they don't, things begin happening. It would have been simpler maybe if they could have fought Stanley Albert Thompson, but there wasn't any man keen to fight him. That was how they started fighting each other. A feud that nobody's paid any mind to for eight or ten years started up again."[53]

Rationalization is a common means of easing the occurrence of

[50] Crum, "Jousha", Prince, p. 201.

[51] Ibid., p. 365.

[52] Crum, "White Girl, Fine Girl", Prince, p. 3.

[53] Crum, "The Black Prince", Prince, p. 54.

an undesirable situation. Searching for some way to ease the loss of his son, Eddie Livudais grasps at the possibility that the girl he lost his life running away with was pretty. Charlotte, the young wife in "The Bright Day," eases her conscience for her part in cheating Pamela Langly, her old maiden aunt, out of her inheritance with the thought, " 'I was glad there wasn't so very much. I was glad there wasn't the house, because that small disappointment made the whole thing more honest somehow'."[54] When Inky doesn't come to see about Annie during the attack from the neighboring islanders, she pardons him with the thought of his other responsibilities. " 'A boat cost a lot of money', she thought. 'And it didn't belong to him. So he had to be careful. More careful than he'd be for himself'."[55]

Many undesirable things can be completely ignored if an individual has sufficient self-control to shut his eyes, ears, and mind to them. Joan Mitchell is upset by her mother's and aunt's refusal to admit the existence of her abortion. They simply pretend that it hasn't happened. Later she finds herself shutting her mind off from thoughts of the future of which she is afraid. Aurelie often resorts to this means of handling unpleasant situations. When her fifth husband suffers a nervous breakdown, she "made herself go back to bed, stretch out under the sheet and close her eyes, pretending, even to herself, that she was asleep."[56] When Lena, the young Negro in "Miss Yellow Eyes,"

[54] Crane, "The Bright Day", Prince, p. 161.

[55] Sky, p. 379.

[56] House, p. 93.

loses her husband, Chris, in the war, our younger sister Celia wants to comfort her but can't break through the wall she has erected between herself and reality.

> " 'I'd lie awake and listen to her pretending that she was asleep. And I'd want to get up and go over there and comfort her somehow. Only, some people you can't comfort. You can only go along with their pretending and pretend yourself. ...I wanted to cry for her if she couldn't cry for herself. But I only got up and pulled down the shade, and made the room dark so I couldn't see any more'."[57]

Children learn early to temper reality with imagination. Bobby Livedais, spending his first night in a strange room alone, realizes "with his eyes and his ears closed it is just like any other place. He could. ...He tried. It worked. He kept at it. And after a bit he convinced himself he wasn't there at all."[58] Joshua, son of a poor fisherman in "Joshua", at his eleven years, has the ability to shut out sounds he does not wish to hear, for instance his mother's flaming, noisy temper.

Sometimes leaving the scene of unhappiness is necessary to put the experience out of mind or least ease its hurt. After Annie's mother dies, Annie goes to the convent in New Orleans and her father makes frequent trips to Fort Pompille because he can't stand the island any more. Doctor Bordeaux, upset over Henry's death, takes his wife over to Petit Prairie for the evening. Perique grows sick of the follies and smell of people and heads for the oak grove with his hammock net to spend the night. Many people have special places they run to. Young people seem to have the greatest need for these havens of solitude until they

[57] Green, "Miss Yellow Eyes", Prince, p. 100.

[58] Ibid, p. 438.

have developed skins tough enough to withdraw into when reality becomes too painful. Joshua and a young friend have a secret place in the old warehouse. They carefully pile old bags in a circle about four feet across with some old furs for seats and beds. Sometimes they even sleep there. Aurelie's alcoholic fifth husband has his own private place in her attic.

> "He lived peacefully up there with his charts and military books and strange old-fashioned navigation instruments. And every now and then he made a trip to the hospital to have his gentle little delusions replaced by heavy shots of vitamin B."[59]

Jean has several places to which she retreats when feeling insecure. In her car she feels secure and safe inside her steel shell. She also likes the dusty quiet and dim emptiness of the top level of the library. But most of all she loves the streetcars.

> "She was afraid of so many things. Sometimes for no reason at all, she would feel the muscles knot up and the cold feeling begin. Then she would head for the streetcar line and ride, back and forth, for an hour or so. Until the noisy rocking ride comforted her."[60]

Annie's favorite place is a tiny field of clover grass completely surrounded by thick oleander bushes. Once Cecile tells her,

" 'When I was a kid, we used to come here too. ...And you know, Madere Terrebonne...that old woman, she told me once that when she was little they used to come here, too'."[61]

[59] House, p. 56.

[60] House, p. 61.

[61] Sky, p. 211.

Home is a familiar place which most people head for when they are afraid or have no place else to go. Madame Ferrebonne holes up in her house all winter and won't step out for fear death will overtake her. When Addie Bonjure was present one night that she had a stroke, he ran right straight home, and got under his own bed. Often the instinct to go home when afraid or unsure leads a person home even though he does not consciously intend to go there. After her abortion, Joan thinks, " 'I shouldn't have come back. I should have found a way to go off somewhere. But I didn't. I wonder why I didn't!'"[62] Annie, walking in the rain after her decision to go to New Orleans with Irby, "was a little surprised when she saw the house in front of her--the gray house where she'd been born...She walked all around, staring as if she'd never seen it before."[63] Luc, a young boy in "One Summer", frightened by his grandfather's death, finds himself at his own gate at the end of a panicked dash in the dark.

Even home, however, is not immune to the continuous process of change. The people in it change and even its locations may change. Any change in the home is accompanied by momentary feelings of insecurity until adjustments can be made to accept its new makeup. So many changes were made in Joan Mitchell's home as her mother progressed through five husbands, bearing a daughter to each of them, that Joan can't be sure about anything there.

[62] House, p. 20.

[63] Way, p. 412.

"She had the funniest feeling that the house wasn't real, wasn't there at all. Nor the people in it."[64] When Adele marries Al, she insists on taking all her own household goods with her. "I wouldn't know what to do without my things." Her little son, not knowing what to make of the move, or his mother's explanation, "That other place, we don't live there. It wasn't no more than a picture."[65], isn't sure of anything for a moment. Pamela Langly speaks for all older people, who cling to the familiarity of home in spite of the many changes that may have taken place. " 'It's nice to go home. It's the nicest part of being away. ...No matter where I was, I always wanted to come back here. It is so wonderfully peaceful to come home'."[66] It is doubtful that she would have changed her mind, even if she had been aware of the scheming of her relatives to cheat her out of her small inheritance from her sister. When a person grows old and tired, there is nowhere to go but home. The very fact that there is someplace to go makes its existence precious.

A Higher Power

Miss Grau's characters, immersed in the physical aspects of life, find little satisfaction in the contemplation of a spiritual afterlife, for it remains as shadowy and nebulous as the

[64] House, p. 6.

[65] Sky, p. 164.

[66] "Bright Day", p. 163.

unpredictable future. The lack of a firm religious belief may be responsible in part for their aimless drifting through life with ready cash and physical pleasure, preferably sexual, as the two positive goals for which to strive. Their attitude toward religion is primarily superstitious, and religious observances are made most often in desperate circumstances when all physical means have failed to remedy the situation. When Chris is wounded in action, Lena places as much faith in voodooism as in Christianity. Actually she receives greater satisfaction from going through the physical actions of invoking their aid than from any strong belief in the strength of their power. "She went to the church and she prayed and lit a candle and asked the priest for special prayers. And she went to the voodoo woman. She'd done all she could. Now there wasn't anything to do but wait."[67] Tanaro Torrebonne, battling with old age and death, suffers under the delusion that the blessing of a priest is necessary to get her out of bed. Since a priest is not present, a blessing by telephone serves the purpose. After spending days of fruitless searching for Harry, the men of his family persuade the priest to go into the swamp with them and attempt to determine the location of his body by following candles floated on shingles. The church service, held every fourth Sunday on the island, is attended only by women and children. It consists of the priest leading them through the formalities of the service without even a sermon to personalize the experience. God remains distant and unfamiliar,

[67]"Yellow Eyes", p. 100.

and discouragement and fear are eased not by prayer but by physical action or withdrawal to a private place. Cecile's childhood picture of God is representative of the concept held by most of Miss Grau's characters.

> "When she was little,...she had seen a face peep out now and then from behind clouds: the same face, which she knew was God's. Sometimes she'd lain flat on her back staring up into a clear blue sky,...trying to make her eyes reach through the solid blue and see what was behind it. And sometimes when she had reached through a great distance she would catch just a glimpse of that face, before it vanished a thousand miles ahead."[30]

They find a more secure basis for faith in the repetitive pattern of nature and the continuous process of life. This does not lead to a belief in a benevolent natural world. At times it is downright malevolent and at other times seems to be rocking with laughter at the follies of man.

Privacy and Solitude

Tightly bound to the natural world by its laws of necessity and the progress of time, driven by the inescapable hunger, sex, and fear, Miss Grau's characters seek to assert their individuality through the only remaining path, independence from others. This, too, is difficult, for people are constantly demanding explanations, giving orders, or simply watching and listening to others. Inky discovers that even the privacy of a shower bath is not respected as he looks up to see a circle of kids watching him.

[30] Sky, p. 205.

"Not giggling, not moving, only staring, solemnly."[69] Annie's affair with Inky has an element of excitement and mystery as long as it remains secretive, but when everyone knows about it, something is ruined.

The problem of considering his actions in relation to his world and his life is intensified when the individual must also see them reflected in the judgments of others.

> "Joan Mitchell rather liked being alone, it gave her a sharp clear feeling. This is me, she could say to herself in the dark, and for the first time she would know exactly what she meant. She did not have to figure herself in relation to other people now."[70]

Though uneasy when under observation, she eagerly fills the role of observer. This seems one way to learn about life without undergoing the painful process of experience.

> "She wanted to move without anyone knowing she was moving. She wanted to slip like a ghost through walls. That was one of her recurring fantasies...that she slid through trees and crept into houses and watched what happened there."[71]

Not only is privacy pleasant, it is essential when facing a problem, though at the moment one is deprived of it, companionship may seem desirable. Each individual must face his own problems, and the only comfort he can receive from others is the thought that they too are facing or have faced similar problems alone. After his grandfather's death, Pec says, " 'I couldn't help feeling that my father wanted me to stay, that he wanted company

[69] Inky, p. 193.

[70] House, p. 184.

[71] House, p. 142.

somehow, but couldn't have it. So I left, walking as fast as I could'."[72] A small Negro girl in "The First Day of School" faces an angry crowd of Whites, alone, refusing to let her father go with her in an attempt to start integration in a grade school.

Though standing alone against the universe gives a person a feeling of pride, it also makes him aware of the fragility of his own body. Before her abortion Joan

> "had always thought of herself as solid. ...But now she knew she wasn't. That she was just a tissue of skin stretched around a frame of bone. Like a canoe or a tent. She had seen wind or rocks break them up, and it bothered her to be stretched so fine and delicate."[73]

Angie, alone on the ledge of the convent after her mother's death, feels that if she lets go the air will pick her up and carry her away like a bird. In "The Longest Day" Hilda Marie Merrick, just home from an appendicitis operation, says, "I feel just like I could shake myself once or twice and my skin would fall right off. Like I'm not attached to it at all."[74]

A moderate desire for solitude and privacy is considered healthy, but carried to extremes it becomes abnormal. It is inhuman for a young, healthy person to cut himself completely off from others. Katherine Fleming, the beautiful divorcee in "Tiger Flower", is one of these people. "She found a positive pleasure in being alone. ...She had a perfect body; she was a superb animal.

[72] "Home Humor", p. 235.

[73] House, p. 143.

[74] Krau, "The Longest Day", The New Yorker, 31:38, September 3, 1955.

But she was not quite human. She did not need anyone."[75] The wife of Inky's boss is a similar woman. She, like Katherine Fleming, finds pleasure in her own body and doesn't need a man or anybody else. Katherine's daughter, Maureen, is another beautiful woman who withdraws to a solitary apartment after several disappointing attempts at marriage. These women are looked at askance by society, for they are serving no purpose other than that of ornamentation.

Women look forward to pregnancy, which makes a special sort of companionship possible. An unborn child is not yet another individual bringing new problems into the relationship, he is an extension of the mother, another "I" until he is born and takes on an individuality of his own. Joan thinks, " 'It could stand anything, if it wasn't so lonely. If I could get pregnant again, I wouldn't be so lonely. ...There'd be two everywhere I went then, for a while'."[76]

As old age and death approach, the desire for companionship diminishes.

> "The fear of dying...grows until at last it separates you from the people you know. ...Because loneliness is more bearable than company when you are waiting: because it's a kind of preparation for that coming final loneliness."[77]

[75] Crane, "Fever Flower", Prince, p. 171.

[76] Houses, p. 241

[77] "One Summer", p. 2[illegible].

Love, Marriage, Parenthood

Courtship and marriage are conducted in most cases in the same practical, resigned manner that Miss Grau's characters assume toward other aspects of life. Once in a while a little mystery and romance enter into the affair, for instance in the case of Alberta's courtship by Stanley Albert Thompson in "The Black Prince". "He took her hand and led her so that the miles seemed nothing and the hours like smooth water." Relationships are primarily on physical basis, the woman being preferably young, attractive, and strong, the man able to give her whatever she wants. Victor Corlieaux finds himself thinking about his wife as one of the chief pleasures of his life. "The soft, heavily fleshed curves of her body, the faint musky smell of her skin, ...Some things a man had to be glad of. And this was one of them."[78] Fidelity is considered one measure of love. Pamera Terrebonne, remembering her husband, thinks, " 'He'd become man; the only man for her. Even after they'd had that one big fight and he'd gone off, she hadn't even been able to look at another man, even though she'd wanted to'."[79] After Hugh Fleming, Katherine's ex-husband, dies his second wife discovers she doesn't want to live either. Adele, unable to remember her first husband, realized that if Al were to die she would not forget him.

Love is at a premium. Few marriages are based on it, and if

[78] Sky, p. 367.

[79] Sky, p. 439.

a satisfactory relationship on some level is not developed, the partners learn to tolerate each other or separate. Aurelia stays with Mr. Gephart, her fifth husband, longer than she has with any of the others mainly because he spends all his time in the attic and she doesn't have to be around him. Katherine Fleming doesn't look back on her broken marriage with anything more than a kind of vague relief that it is finished at last.

People marry for many reasons: companionship, sex, social pressure, physical support, excitement. " 'A woman alone', says Aurelia, 'is so very sad'." She manages to keep herself surrounded with husbands to avoid this fate. Julius Krohnert sees a girl climbing out of the water, "and then he decided to get married. ...He didn't see her face once. He didn't think to look. There was just the cloth stuck to the skin...and under it the clear outline of her body."[60] Nelle Livudais does not to get her husband. "She went to bed with him, demanding no promises, asking for nothing, not even love. Then she stopped seeing him. All of a sudden...so he married her."[61] Lena marries Chris because he promises to help her be accepted as white. Everyone expects to get married some day, but marriage does not always live up to expectations. Angie realizes this as she sails away with Inky.

> "She'd wanted to get away. ...And here it was, all at once. And she'd be getting married too. ... But it was strange now, because it wasn't at all exciting. It wasn't sad either. It was just something you had to do because you'd planned it that way a long time ago. If it wasn't exciting now you knew it was

[60] Sky, p. 53.

[61] Sky, p. 94.

because it was too close to you. You'd had a good look at it from before. And decided you wanted it. That was what you had to remember now. And go ahead."[62]

People often separate when the purposes for which they marry remain unsatisfied. Aggie, the Negro widow in "White Girl Nice Girl", decides to have nothing more to do with men after three or four give her just kids and no money. In "The Way of a Man", William's mother leaves the old fisherman who is his father when she sees nothing of all the money he was rumored to have. A man must have more than money to hold some women. Amelia and Katherine Fleming both leave their first husbands when they find them unexciting, but manage to retain a sizeable monthly allowance. Since reproduction is one of the big practical reasons for marriage, the training and treatment of children is at the basis of many fights between parents. Joshua learns early that one sure way to get his mother on his side is for his father to say a word against him, and vice versa. It's as if they can't ever be together. Most fights, if they aren't continuous battles, end as those of his parents do, in their room making love.

Raising children consists mainly of letting them learn from experience, and blows and threats are used more frequently than patient understanding. The behavior of children is met with the characteristic resignation of Miss Grau's characters. Al Landry says, " 'They can't think of nothing. I can't think of nothing. There is nobody nowhere can think of anything to stop the kids

[62] Oak, p. 414.

from doing what they bound to do. ...Nothing to do about it. Like the hurricane, nothing to do'."[63] Henry's death in the swamp stimulated a series of threats to children and resolutions by parents to keep the experience from being repeated. But underneath they all know that boys have to go out and look around and in the process some get lost and don't return. Hugh Fielding looks on his daughter by his first marriage as a business proposition and feels his investment to be well made when she turns out to be a lovely young woman who attracts a respectable husband. Mothers often use painful means of teaching their children lessons. The first drops of rain preceding the hurricane send the children scurrying home for cover, but since they had paid no attention to their mothers' first calls, punishment is in store.

> "By this time most of the doors were closed and bolted. And their mothers weren't in any hurry to open them up. ...Let them stay out a while, they thought,...be a good lesson. And so the kids kicked at the doors and screamed with fear before they got inside."[64]

When her nephew, Bobby, refused to come down out of a tree, Annie Livadais throws rocks at him until he changes his mind. She follows the lump of sugar, popped in his mouth to stop his yelling while she treats his brush burns, with a cup of soapy water for the name he called her while up in the tree. Julius Arcenaux's mother shows a rare gift of understanding when she answers his report that he can hear moonflowers open, not with laughter but with, " 'Next time I will listen'."

[63] Sky, p. 226.

[64] Sky, p. 465.

Women

Somewhat the same qualities are considered admirable in both men and women. Strength, courage, and skill in performing physical feats are expected in men, while patience and practicality are female strong points. The individual who possesses not only the virtues of his own sex but also those of the opposite sex as well is highly respected. A woman in her role as bearer and preserver of life has great need for the qualities of strength and courage. At times women possess these to a greater degree than their husbands. One of the most burning taunts is for a woman to call a man a coward. Children often show their elders up where bravery is concerned. Joshua goes out in a small boat in waters that all the men are afraid to enter because of the presence of an enemy submarine. Ruth, a small Negro girl, faces a crowd of whites alone, until her father in his fear pulls her back. Rose, in "The Girl With the Flaxen Hair", having a tooth pulled, doesn't make a sound while her mother almost faints.

Though the majority of a woman's time is spent preparing meals and doing other menial tasks, she is also called upon from time to time to serve as a doctor. The treatment of injuries may demand a great amount of courage, but most women seem able to summon it up when they must. When Julius Arcenaux's father comes home with a long gash on his arm, his wife calmly sews it up before running out of the house with her hands over her mouth. Annie, trying to decide how much she loves Inky, wonders whether she would be able to suck the poison of a snake bite from his

leg should the need arise.

When a woman's husband dies or leaves her and she finds her role extended to include that of provider for her family, she calmly accepts it and does the best she can. In fact women face life with an infinitude of patience, meeting everything from an unfaithful husband, to a lost son, to a hurricane, rocking and waiting with a pot of coffee on the back of the stove.

The one thing which women can not exert complete control over is the sexual drive, and they seem to feel almost resentful about this at times. Joan Mitchell thinks, " 'It's so silly. Body running away with you like this. Running you so fast you can't slow. And all you can think of is the mark of a man. The stupid silly mark of a man'."[85] And Therese Landry's mother cautions her, " 'You got to be real extra careful or you get more sorrow than fun from a man'."[86] Joan's resentment toward men does not eliminate her desire to bear a child. It merely stimulates the thought, " 'It's a pity you have to have a man for it. It would be so much nicer if it just happened. ...If you could just say this is my child, and not just half mine'."[87]

Men

Men are not expected to be practical at all times, just as

[85] House, p. 164.

[86] Ibid., p. 412.

[87] House p. 217.

women are not expected to be brave all the time. A few "silly" actions are condoned in a man. As long as he fulfills his obligations to support his family, he is entitled to get drunk once in a while, get in fights, chase women, or try his hand at some form of art. A woman is expected to depend upon a man, but a man must make his own way. Henry Livadais has gone out alone ever since he was twelve and big enough to have a shotgun and handle a pirogue. When a boy reaches a level of self-sufficiency, his father feels he no longer has the right to give him orders.

A man must be able to hold his own in a fight and stand up bravely even though he may be afraid. This idea prompts Jarson, an ex-convict in "White Girl Fine Girl", to taunt a young boy, "You acting like a real man there. ...You might could be thinking that you a man." But the boy has not quite reached manhood, for though he stands his ground bravely, he allows his boat to be taken without putting up a fight. A man must not admit pain. Though it may be extreme, he must keep it inside himself. A young boy with a broken leg from Terre Haute whom Annie helps on the night of the attack, doesn't make a sound, "but you can tell from the arch of his back that he is screaming."[68] Old man Bordeaux gets caught between his boat and the dock. He doesn't make a sound, "what stays wrapped up in a tight little cocoon, just his and the pain."[69]

[68] Sky, p. 386.

[69] Sky, p. 27.

Honor plays a small part in Miss Grau's characters' concept of manliness: strength, attractiveness, and plenty of pocket money far overshadow it. Those latter qualities are the ones which attract women, and being found attractive by women is more greatly admired than being trusted by other men. Inky thinks, looking at Hector Bordeaux, Cecile's husband, "Women might find him attractive. And men wouldn't trust him. Maybe that wasn't such a bad way to be."[90] Stanley Albert Thompson is another man who gains the admiration of women through possession of these qualities, and the respect of men though not their confidence. The one way Julius Arcenaux can stop the ridicule of his brothers for not coming out on the boats with them to do a man's work is by saying, " 'You got nothing to laugh at. All those days you looking at fish and shrimp, me, I'm looking at all the girls what come down to the store'."[91] The basic roles of men and women are dramatized by their manner of facing a hurricane: women care for the home and children while men protect the boats which are their source of support.

Fear

Fear is an inescapable part of every life, and the fears a man has and the way he handles them indicate his character and his attitude toward life in general. Miss Grau's characters, with

[90] Sky, p. 40.

[91] Sky, p. 61.

their purely physical view of life, are haunted by a fear of death. Though their lives may not be blissfully happy, they have no desire to exchange them for the emptiness they see beyond the grave. A fear of old age, with its accompanying loss of virility and inevitable nearness to death is associated with the fear of death. Miss Grau's characters accept their fears and learn to live with them, some openly admitting they are afraid, others denying their fear, and still others making excuses for the fear they cannot hide.

After his first contact with death and the realisation that he too will die someday, Moe encounters the fear of death.

> "Somehow nothing much seemed real. ...Nothing but the pile of thunderheads up in the sky and the fear that had caught up with me, was running circles around me. ... Like the mockingbird that was singing louder and louder. ...Very slowly I sat down...and listened."[92]

Joshua's fear of snakes, alligators, submarines, and dead men is overpowered by his desire for a warm coat. He hums a tune under his breath that he has heard his father singing, and tells himself the cold in his stomach is the weather outside. Realizing that all men experience fear, some men use this as an excuse for cowardly behavior, and admitting that other men have carried out their duties in the face of similar fears. Joshua's father, refusing to go out in his fishing boat with an enemy submarine in the vicinity, says, " 'I ain't scared of nothing a man ain't got cause to be scared of. ...Sure I scared! Everybody scared'."[93]

[92]"One Summer", p. 254.

[93]"Joshua", p. 257.

Tete, Lennie's mother, accused of being a coward for dodging the draft, points out that all Chris got for his brave enlistment was a bullet in his chest. " 'I may be a coward," he says, "but, ma, I'm breathing'." Julius Arcenaux's brothers think he is a coward because he has never liked to fight and because he hasn't taken his place on the boat with them. But Julius remembers standing bravely up to a painter in the swamp, and lets them think whatever they please, saying resignedly, " 'I can't help what I am, ma'."

An awareness of coming old age is frequently brought to the surface. Annie sees an old brown leaf on the ground, all wrinkled and curled like a cocoon and thinks, " 'When I'm old I'm going to look like that'." Inky, looking at Cecile, thinks, " 'She going to make one of those round-faced old women with round cheeks and a little round mouth all run together with wrinkles and folds, like a bawnie doll that's been left too close to the fire'."[94] Joan, noticing Doris' skin flushed in spots beneath her sunburn, thinks, " 'So that's what she's going to look like when she gets old. She's going to be one of those ruddy-faced old women who look tipsy all the time'."[95]

With an awareness of death comes a curiosity about what it will be like. " 'I can remember', Joan thinks, 'when I was born. A lot of swirling waters and a sweet like surf pounding. And do

[94] Inky, p. 22.

[95] House, p. 16 .

you remember dying afterward? Like that. A circle. Slipping in and out of life'."[96] People struggle against death up to the very end. "Every winter Mamere Forestonne had had a struggle with death, every winter for the past ten years. Though she locked the windows and put the heavy bar across the door, he still managed to find his way inside. ...Each year he came earlier."[97] But it's all according to the pattern of life. The younger generation grows up and their elders step aside to make room for them. The struggle of living is so exhausting that some feel a relief to have it over at last. The spinster school teacher in "First Day of School" feels this way.

> "Because she was old and confused by a world she no longer understood, a world her little children had taken over, had grown up in and taken over, Ethyl Holloway fainted very gently. ...By the time her head touched the wheel, she was feeling quite happy. The darkness was no more terrifying than the daylight."[98]

Young people, especially, find it difficult to maintain resignation in the face of death. After Henry's disappearance, Cecile throws a brick at the sky, saying, " 'It don't matter that we got caught and die, us. It don't even matter that we keep alive'."[99] Mac finds that facing death is all a part of gaining maturity, and, as he watches his father write his grandfather's name on the death certificate, thinks, " 'What he is doing now, I will be

[96] House, p. 204.

[97] Sky, p. 43[illegible].

[98] Grau, "The First Day of School", Saturday Evening Post, 234:54, September 30, 1961.

[99] Sky, p. 285.

coing for him someday...and then we'll all move up one step again. And it will be up you looking down at me, lying still and dusty."[100]

Men, taking the business of life seriously but not quite sure of the purpose of living, are aware of their weakness and lack of knowledge in the face of the vast universe. They sometimes get the feeling that their efforts and anxieties make them absurd objects of laughter. Mac, running in panic from his grandfather's wake, personifies a mockingbird as fear. He hears it singing louder and louder, " 'as if it was laughing at me, trying to run away from it'."[101] Joshua dreams of a U-boat which he has never seen. "Its outline and shape change with each dream. But the action is always the same--the gun pointing at him and the laughing."[102] "Nobody talks much in the swamps. People get suddenly embarrassed and any of their words and speak only in whispers when they say anything at all, because the swamp is like a person listening...and ready to laugh at whatever you say."[103]

Dreams

Dreams, like fear, can be used as a key to character and attitude toward life. The same striving for practicality which governs their everyday life causes Miss Grau's characters to

[100]"One Summer", p. 227.

[101]"One Summer", p. 254.

[102]"Joshua", p. 284.

[103]"Joshua", p. 284.

abandon any artistic dreams they may have and concentrate their efforts on occupations with greater monetary value. Michael Kern tells Joan,

> " 'I used to want to play with a band. ...I wish I had, but there's no living in that. ...They all have other jobs in the daytime. Work like dogs. ...I couldn't do that, so I didn't try. ...Just sometimes I wish I had'."[104]

Hugh Fleming is interested in sculpture. "But Hugh was also a practical man. He never could quite convince himself that money spent for lessons would have been well spent, so he never took any. ...But he never quite gave up the idea. ...He went to work in soap as a hobby."[105] Mr. Raymond makes amateur attempts at composing music and plays the piano beautifully but he is forced to work in the post office to support his family. When he leaves his nag ing wife, the reader hopes her story is true, that he has gone back to France to study music. Inky has artistic talent but he only exercises it for the lucrative purpose of drawing nudes to sell to New Orleans tourists.

The abandonment of a dream does not necessarily indicate a desire to forget it. Dreams and pleasant experiences are cherished in the memory and serve as islands of escape from the dullness of everyday routine. Memories, however, do not retain images indefinitely, and the dreams and pleasant experiences pass with time into oblivion, leaving the individual feeling cheated.

[104] Pause, p. 42.

[105] "Fever Flower", p. 167.

> "The wonderful lovely sorrow. ...The something that was lost, the place you couldn't go back to,... the dream that slipped away, like fog, and you couldn't remember the smell or the color or the feel of it, what it was and where it had been. And that was the final end, when there wasn't even a memory."[106]

Adele, trying to remember her first husband, discovers

> "He is gone, clean gone, the way chalk is when a blackboard's been wiped with water. ...She was almost angry with him. He had cheated her. He had not made her miss him. He was just gone. And he had taken his memory with him."[107]

As Annie sails away with Inky, her mind goes back to those days before Inky came, trying to find them, trying to find some detail that she could hang a thread of memory on.

> "There wasn't any. She felt cheated. She didn't want to go back. But she didn't want to forget. She wanted to have Derique tucked away carefully in a corner of her memory. ...And again, woman-fashion, she recognized that this memory would be a comfort. When things did not go well with Inky, she could conjure up another image and hide behind it."[108]

Memory tends to glamorize past events and dreams tend to stay clear longer than actual events. Fred tells Joan when she expresses the wish that she had known her father better. " 'It's better to remember things than really see them'."[109] Lily forgets what her father looks like, but years later the pictures conjured up in her mind by Rose's stories remain as clear as ever. Annie makes up an old lover to satisfy Inky's curiosity, and as she gets into the story she can see Darron, "as plain as

[106] House, p. 58.

[107] Sky, p. 220.

[108] Sky, p. 426.

[109] House, p. 210.

if she were really remembering him. ...And as she remembered, she was almost sure it had happened to her."[110] Escape from reality into a world of makebelieve is comforting to Joan Mitchell, for her behavior is not consistent with the standards of her actual environment. She tells herself the story of her relationship with Michael Korn in the crudest words she can think of. "Being tough and cheap made her feel happier. She lived for the moment in a world where such things happened all the time, were a part of life and nobody noticed."[111]

METAPHORS

A few metaphors repeat themselves in Miss Gray's works but none of them are used consistently enough to be considered symbols. She speaks of time in terms of flowing water, and in The House on Coliseum Street Joan Mitchell comes to think almost entirely in water imagery. She tracks Michael's new girl through the rainy winter days by her green raincoat. "She kept track of it. The way you'd keep track of a timber in the surf. Losing it for long periods, seeing it finally bob to the surface again."[112] After seeing them together,

> "She sat very still, letting her eyes see the patterns of dark and light, not thinking of anything at all. Drifting like seaweed. She wouldn't go to

[110] Sky, p. 1[illegible].

[111] House, p. 190.

[112] House, p. 193.

> the beach any more. Just to the mountains. Where there were sleek green fish in shallow stony streams."[113]

She follows them, "moving noiselessly, leaving the night silence like water unruffled behind her."[114] In the library where Joan works, the lights go out tier after tier at closing. "She found she could move just ahead of them, as she would have done before a coming tide."[115] "Joan floated--not happily, but not unhappily, either--suspended in space, unhampered, able to move at will. Like water, she liked to think."[116] She carries with her at all times the thought of her lost child, "big-eyed and sad, drifting in its ocean."[117]

One of Miss Grau's less lyrical metaphors is the army. The army is associated with death and is used from time to time as a threat for grown men in much the same way that the imaginary bogeyman is used to frighten children. Inky's first comment on seeing the slick whitish scar covering the back of Lucy Livedais' head is, " 'You nearly got killed once. ...You in the war?'"[118] When Rose is killed in the railroad yards, she is wrapped in an army-colored blanket. Pete tries to get a finger cut off to avoid the draft, and when he ends up losing his whole hand, he

[113] House, p. 189.

[114] House, p. 201.

[115] House, p. 1[illegible]3.

[116] House, p. 182.

[117] House, p. 218.

[118] Her, p. 197.

still prefers that to the army. Hilda Marie Merrick, fighting with her brother, shouts the worst thing she can think of, " 'The army's gonna get you'!"[119] Claude Bourgeois tries to get Stanley Phillips and Oscar Lavie, neither of whom has bothered to register for the draft, to take his boat out into dangerous waters. When they refuse, he threatens, " 'Iffen you was in the army, you wouldn't have no chance to say no'."[120]

In The Black Prince, when people cut themselves off from others, usually as a result of shock or fear, their eyes are repeatedly described as flat pieces of silver. As Jayson chases his illegitimate daughter home with the toss of a brick, her eyes are "two flat round pieces of silver." After Willie shoots Stanley Albert Thompson, "his eyes weren't dark any more; they were silver, two polished pieces of silver." Hearing the news of his grandfather's death, Mac notices that the eyes of their Negro cook have become "bright live metal, eyes like flat pieces of silver." When Katherine Fleming tells her husband she is leaving him, his eyes turn "shiny as silver and as hard."

Miss Grau's most interesting recurring image is the mocking bird. The South is full of mocking birds, singing day and night during the summer, but Miss Grau is selective about where she lets them appear in her works. She seems to use the mocking bird in somewhat the same way the nightingale is used by English writers, accompanying melancholy, fear, and death. Cecile is cut

[119]"The Longest Day", p. 30.

[120]"Joshua", p. 266.

thinking about Henry's death. She looks into the sky where she thought she could see God's face as a child, but it is "clear and empty, and flat." She picks up her baby protectively and hurries home while "a couple of mockingbirds squawk and flight in the twisted limbs of the chinaberry."[121] Outside the house where his grandfather died, Mac hears a mockingbird singing, and as he runs home his fear is embodied in a mockingbird flying along beside him. After Maxere Farrebonne's stroke "a mockingbird is singing at the top of his voice." When Eddie Livudais returns exhausted from his search for his son, having found no trace of him, his cousin's wife helps him home, waving her hand at "a mockingbird right over them, screaming and diving at their heads."[122] Eddie's wife calls him a coward for coming home empty handed and "a mockingbird comes down and sits on the edge of the roof, squawking."[123] On her way home from the dean's house where she has ruined Michael's career, Joan disturbs a mockingbird. "Directly overhead he shifted and fluttered and sent down a half line of song, sleepily."[124] The stealthy shifting of furniture upstairs, indicating Aurelie's fifth husband, Mr. Herbert's nervous breakdown, is accompanied by "one sleepy confused squawk from a mockingbird."[125] When Claudia is dazedly trying to adjust

[121] Sky, p. 265.

[122] Sky, p. 273.

[123] Sky, p. 280.

[124] House, p. 241.

to a new father and a new home, "a big mockingbird comes down to perch on the porch steps, his long thin tail jabbing the air."[126] Annie miserably tells Perique of her possible trip to New Orleans, hoping he will ask her to stay on the island. He does nothing of the sort and "a mockingbird settles himself on the top branch of the sweet olive and shakes the water from his feathers noisily."[127]

CONCLUSION

The one critical article written about the works of Shirley Ann Grau is by Alwyn Berland in Critique. He says of her books, "They are all of them perceptive works, well-written, precocious, versatile in range, and--all three--less achieved than promising." His criticism is a structural criticism.

> "There is so much more building up than there is denouement, so much more preparation than the event itself ever supports. ...In Miss Grau's work, too often the effect is as of a construction done in beautifully polished stone, that just escapes emotional or intellectual shape because the artist withdraws before the keystone is added."

He is troubled by the fact that

> "curiously enough, Miss Grau leaves the impression that she knows what she is doing. The absence of keystone, whether unifying symbol, or theme, or resolving incident, seems not accidental but deliberate. She builds toward these, and then stops."[128]

[125] House, p. 89.

[126] Sky, p. 179.

[127] Sky, p. 410.

[128] Alwyn Berland, "The Fiction of Shirley Ann Grau", Critique VI: 78, Spring, 1963.

I feel that a keystone to her writing may lie in her view of life. The characters themselves don't see events which we may consider climactic as momentous points in their lives. They take all experiences in stride, the large as well as the small ones, with the attitude, "Some things you can handle and change. Other things you can just handle." Their lives progress from one action to the next where they begin again the process of following through the results of the action. Annie's yearning for excitement and her ripeness for love culminate in her leaving with Inky. There is no reason why it is Inky rather than Perique. They are simply thrown together by a chain of events initiated when she helps Inky avoid a fight outside The Rendezvous. In <u>The Hard Blue Sky</u> we witness the islanders' abilities to face the upheavals in their lives calmly. The hurricane approaching at the end of the novel is another situation beyond their control and will determine their subsequent actions by the amount of damage it does and changes it makes in the island and their lives. The events during the hurricane and its aftermath would be another novel. The trip in search of stuffed owls which leads to Joan's pregnancy is a spur-of-the-moment plan. Their complete unpreparedness for the ensuing action is what causes their trouble. There is no way of controling the unexpected. One thing leads to another and catches the individual up in the chain of events.

Why do they do something? Miss Drau's characters don't know themselves. A situation seems to demand certain actions, and the individual follows through, not worrying about consequences.

Consequences are part of the unpredictable future which will be handled when it comes. To communicate this process of living one day at a time, Miss Grau allows her stories to move from one day or one event to the next. So more explanations are given for their actions than her characters actually have, which helps to convey their feeling of being caught up in the force of incomprehensible fate.

For them life has no climactic moments. It is just a series of events which repeat themselves in the lives of one individual after another. Miss Grau has plotted her stories to catch the "random, spiraling movement" which she sees life following. Those who find this concept troubling will also find her stories troubling.

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BASIC ATTITUDES UNDERLYING THE WORKS OF SHIRLEY ANN GRAU

by

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The publications of Shirley Ann Grau include The Black Prince and Other Stories, 1955, a collection of short stories; The Hard Blue Sky, 1958; The House on Coliseum Street, 1961; and thirteen short stories published in The New Yorker, Mademoiselle, The Atlantic Monthly, The Reporter, Vogue, Saturday Evening Post, and Redbook.

Her first book was praised highly for its lyrical style and sensitive perception of people. Her novels received more adverse criticism than her short stories, though they were praised also. Most critics feel that Miss Grau is at her best as a short story writer and her greatest talent lies in the ability to catch "the share of a lifetime in the merest shadow of an event."

Life is seen by her characters as a series of experiences along the continum of time. Necessity is the prime determiner of behavior. Whatever life brings is resignedly accepted with courage and strength. Weaker characters ignore or run from their problems. The faith of her characters lies in the continuation of life, and in the repetitive patterns of life and nature above and beyond the individual. God is so distant and impersonal that any worship is primarily superstitious. Miss Grau's characters seek privacy and solitude, especially when they have problems or grow older. Courtship and marriage seldom live up to all that was expected of them though many satisfactory relationships do develop. Men are responsible for providing for a family, women for bearing children and caring for basic physical needs. Attractiveness, courage, strength and physical skill, ready cash, and patience are all admirable qualities. Their greatest fear is

of death; a lesser fear is of being laughed at.

Time and life are referred to in terms of water imagery, especially in The House on Coliseum Street. The army is associated with death. In The Black Prince, when people cut themselves off from others as a result of shock or fear, their eyes become like flat pieces of silver. The mockingbird is used in much the same way as the nightingale is used by English writers, accompanying melancholy, fear, and death

These basic attitudes underlie most of Miss Gray's works. A recognition of them may be helpful to those attempting to understand her manner of constructing a story and her treatment of characters and situations.